

## **Across the track**

*by Christopher Jurczyk*

It was when I was 4 years old that I was at the stadium for the first time. It was not an Olympic one, but the standard stadium that was home to "SKRA Warszawa" located on the Warszawska Street. My grandfather took me there since there was nobody to take care of me as my parents were at work. At the time the stadium hosted Track&Field National Championships eliminations and my grandfather was a referee, the starter. He had a gun and... at the time it seemed sufficient enough of a reason for me to go with him.

In his grey trousers and dark blue jacket, characteristic of all PZLA\* referees, my grandfather looked very elegant. Whatever the abbreviation stood for, it looked wonderful with the eagle in the background placed on the red label, located at my grandfather's lapel.

And it began!

- Ready, set, go!

- ... first! ... Second!

- Chris, sit here and don't go anywhere; 400m over hurdles and 200 women's and we are on our way home - shouted my grandpa dividing his attention between the conversation with the meeting director and looking after me.

But who would sit and do nothing when there was so much going around. This could not be expected of such a lively four-year old that I was. The stadium was an ideal place to sightsee, a place where one couldn't be bored.

Shot-put – grandfather taught me back then that it is absolutely not to be referred to as throwing the ball.

Interesting, why do all these big men groan and pant so much letting such a small ball out of their hands. My beach ball – oh, this one seemed much heavier. I could even try this...

- Whose is this child? What are you doing here boy? Do you want to squash your leg? – shouted the contestants.

And I just wanted to check whether the weight of the ball was within the rules.

I became scared of the questions asked by these strangers.

Run away! Run away and quickly. Running was at the time the discipline which was to be immediately put into practice. Fast, as fast as I could.

And then... I remember only screams and shouts of competitors wearing large numbers on their chests a hit in the head and sharp edges of the tartan track ripping through my cheek.

I wanted to get to the other side. The distance of 10 metres across the track... What followed, was a sort of the mixture of loud and colourful pictures.

- Chris, what have you done? I asked you not to move from your spot! Are you ok? – asked my grandfather in a broken voice.

- This is outrageous! Who has let this brat in? Pawel has lost the chance to qualify to the final of the national championships – screamed a man in the red tracksuit of the host team.

- You stinking muck, do you know what you have done? With this speed I could have killed You – shouted a competitor wearing green shorts.

My head ached. Tears came down to my eyes with such rapidity that the surrounding world seemed wet, cold and terrible. I wanted to run, run away, but I couldn't.

And then a very strange and an extraordinary thing happened. The competitor from row number 3, who had suffered a serious fall have tripped over my knees of the four year old, came up to us, still massaging his sore knee and said:

- Why do you keep on screaming at this child? Do you want him to be afraid of running? Do you want him t get scared of sport, stadiums, competitors and do you want him to always run away at the sight of the track?

It was only then that I had the courage to glimpse at this young athlete, who in a way saved my life. Thin, tall like a sprinter and my head stuck out not much further than over his hurt knee. The things that he then said, I think, I will remember until the rest of my life:

- Run courageously and fast but never across the track.

Since then my I have been doing best to implement that rule.

I kept on accompanying my grandfather during the track and field competitions. In the second grade of primary school I was the fastest in the 60m sprint during Marian Woronin's "Track & Field Thursdays". At that time I was practicing a lot with my grandfather Kazimierz even during the standard competitions inside the AWF\*\* sports hall. I took my tracksuit, old trainers and carefully copied sprinters' moves. A few minutes of warm up, stretching, jog. I did the same thing as they did. I did not disrupt anyone.

I felt the real competitor. Their muscles became mine, their strength became my strength. I always kept in mind the words of the SKRA sprinter: "never across the track". And this was how I tried to act in my life.

One day, as usual after a practice, I stormed into the house hungry and breathless. I was already about to ask mum to get something for supper, when my attention was drawn by the face of a man who suffered a car accident, which was shown in the sports news. That moment I understood the meaning of the subconscious. So many years have passed.

It is believed that the childhood memories remain in his subconscious. This is how it has been in case of me. The face of this young man, the one which I saw on the TV, came immediately back to me. It was this sprinter that as a naughty child I ran in front of during Polish Championship eliminations during the distance of 400 with hurdles. Today his face seemed somehow sharper. Maybe under the influence of a pain of some kind? He had a terrible car accident, someone unexpectedly stood in his path.

The same as that day... I ran across his track. I felt co-guilty. I knew that his sports career is on the excellent rise, he represented Poland during the Atlanta Olympic Games.

From that moment on I kept track of all of the press announcements regarding the health condition of "my" competitor. I even asked my grandfather if he could find out among the friendly referees and coaches. I learned that his condition was very serious. Doctors' opinions very carefully made everyone aware that the return to the world of sport will be no longer possible as a competitor.

But he fought back and was able to get back into shape.

The months passed. The European Championships in Budapest grew nearer. I knew that Pawel Januszewski was to take part in the event. I carefully studied his sports history. I knew his coaches, his achievements. I got interested in his life, so that I could live through his successes and failures along with him.

Was he my idol?

Now I think that he definitely was one. Especially back then. When he stood at the highest position on the European Championship's podium and achieved the Polish National record in 400m with hurdles with the time of 48,17 seconds.

My life has also changed a lot. As the result of a spine injury during the practice, I was paralyzed for many months. I knew what a man, who one day, suddenly loses everything, feels. Is this supposed to be a penalty? Will I ever be able to walk, run do sport again in my life? I asked these questions almost everyday to myself.

I was heartbroken; I lost the happiness from life and the sense of living. This was the year 2002. I was watching the live transmission from the European Track&Field Championships in Munich.

My discipline – 400 m over hurdles. Pawel was the Champion but is he going to be able to defend the title? His old and new injuries have left a mark... I closed my eyes. I don't want to know... I am afraid.

Pawel came third. He won a place on the podium. I will once also achieve one, even if I have to get there on a wheelchair.

I walk. I run! I will be the Champion.

*Pawel Januszewski the Polish Champion, The European Champion at the distance of 400 over hurdles in Budapest, took part in the ceremony of distinction awarding in the 16<sup>th</sup> Jan Paradowski contest in the Olympic Centre in Warsaw. During the ceremony, Dorota Bierkowska read the awarded story written by Krzysztof Jurczyk. The story was published for the first time in "Magazyn Olimpijski" ("The Olympic Magazine") (2006, nr.2 pages 28-29)*

*My names is Chris... No. I should start that way.*

*It all began from the fact that my head teacher, who teaches the Polish Language, proposed for me to write story for a competition. The woman totally forgot that recently I failed my essay. Me, "a writer?" There is nowhere this can be allocated within the broad scope of my interests. I was about to protest and oppose, but the teacher added that the story is to be submitted for the competition dealing with the theme of Olympics.*

*This was different. I decided to write the truth.*

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